

Matthew 4:1-11

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' ⁴ But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",
and "On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

⁷ Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Renounce Evil

I've discovered a conspiracy. I tried on a pair of dress slacks that I hadn't worn in awhile and found that they were very tight around the waist. I think the dry cleaner is doing something to alter the size of my clothes.

Or perhaps I'm just gaining some weight. I think I'm like most Americans in the sense that I can go on a diet for awhile, lose a set amount of weight, then go off the diet and gain back all the weight that I had lost. And I think that many Christians approach the season of Lent the same way that so many of us approach dieting; we "give up" something for 40 days, then go right back to our same old routines after Easter. But if we look at our Gospel lesson today, of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and we look at the history of Lent, we'll discover that the season we have entered is not a time of temporary abstinence but rather a time of preparation for challenges that confront us throughout our lives.

Lent is based on the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness immediately after he was baptized and just prior to the commencement of his public ministry that would end with his crucifixion. If you recall it was at his baptism that Jesus heard a voice from heaven saying, "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." Perhaps Jesus knew that information all along, but to have a voice from heaven confirm that you are God's beloved is really something to celebrate, as we celebrate baptisms today affirming to the one being baptized that they are beloved by God and beloved by the church. And just as it is a cause for celebration, baptism is also a call to action, a call to live up to the title we have been given, "beloved by God." I

mentioned that I had researched my own Schaeffer family and discovered how my great great grandfather was described as a very industrious man who loved the church, loved his family, and was kind to his neighbors. I know that those were qualities that were passed down, but not just passed down genetically but rather by instruction and expectation. To be of the Schaeffer family came with some expectation. To be in God's family also comes with expectation, and I think Jesus spent those 40 days in the wilderness discerning what the expectations were for one whom God himself had declared to be his beloved son. Forty days of prayer and fasting was a feat in and of itself, but the intent of those forty days was to gain clarity and spiritual strength in order to live up to his namesake.

And live up to it he did. Jesus went about, by most estimates for three years, healing, teaching, feeding, and expressing God's own love in every facet of his life. But if that was all that he did, he would not have made such enemies. No Jesus also had a sense of destiny, a firm belief that God was reclaiming his creation from the forces of evil and sin and death and decay, and Jesus knew that he was the Messiah, the chosen one who was coming to establish God's kingdom on earth for eternity. He also knew that part of that destiny involved suffering and death at the hands of his enemies, those who were fighting to preserve man's kingdom on earth, and when his enemies finally nailed him to that cross they thought that the victory belonged to them. But God had other plans.

We too are God's beloved children, and that means more than an assurance that we'll all be living in paradise someday. We continue the reclamation of creation that Jesus started. Historically Lent has been a time of preparation of new converts who would be officially welcomed into the Church on Easter. But these candidates were not just trying to pass some test so they could live on easy street from Easter onward. They were preparing to live a life for Christ. It's like a candidate for medical school. My son is studying now for his MCATs, the test you must take in order to get into medical school, but he's not under any illusions that once he's finished taking the test, or once he's in medical school that the road will somehow get smoother. He knows that he has a hard road ahead as an intern and a resident and then even as a full-fledged doctor. And all a Christian needs to do is open his or her eyes to all the evil in this world to know that we have a rough road ahead as well living out our calling to obey Jesus, to love others, to tend to "the least of these" and to stand up for what is right even when we're under threat of being knocked down by what is wrong.

It's sometimes hard for us to see that any progress has been made in this world since Jesus initiated the kingdom, and too many people have given up hope that God's kingdom will ever come on earth as it is in heaven – and so they have rewritten their faith and instead believe that Jesus is just going to take us all away from this crazy world one soul at a time. But God has greater plans than that, and it's important that we not compromise our faith in that eternal kingdom.

Because the vision is essential to our mission. I think that 40 days in the wilderness bonded that vision of God's kingdom in Jesus' mind. That enabled him to describe God's kingdom in so many creative and powerful ways. And his sense of mission was so strong that he was able to resist

every temptation imaginable – from food for an empty stomach to all the kingdoms of this world.

So spend some time this Lent in prayer and in fasting. Build up our spiritual strength for the battles that you are facing and you know you will face. Through it all, keep your eyes on the kingdom as God promises it, and may your walk with Jesus be both fruitful and enduring. Amen.